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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a typology of terrorism which is grounded in how media differentially cover each type. The typology challenges some of the basic assumptions, such as that the media "allow" themselves to be exploited by terrorists and "encourage" terrorism, and the conventional wisdom about the net effects of the media's portrayal of each type of terrorism. The model emphasizes the amount of coverage each form of terrorism receives, the flavor or tone of the coverage, and the political effects of such coverage in influencing public opinion and consciousness. The paper discusses two types of terror: grievance terror, identified as terror which challenges power, and institutional terror, which seeks to maintain the status quo and power. The paper concludes that in assessing the net effects of the way terrorism is covered there are several dimensions: a de-emphasis and reframing of United States/state sponsored terror, the portrayal of anti-United States grievance terror as irrational and without just cause, and a siege mentality among the larger population resulting from the way news skews the coverage toward grievance terror committed against U.S./Western interests and away from terror resulting from United States government policies. Fifty-six references are appended. (MS)

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THE POLITICS AND COVERAGE OF TERROR:

FROM MEDIA IMAGES TO PUBLIC CONSCIOUSNESS

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The Politics and Coverage of Terror:
From Media Images to Public Consciousness

Introduction

A local television station in Buffalo recently conducted a "telepoll" on the question: "Does media coverage fuel terrorist acts?" The station received over 1,700 calls with 90% of the callers responding yes. While certainly an unscientific measure, the overwhelming sentiments expressed by those who did call is impressive. A random sample of people may not have resulted in the same percentage spread but the poll shows the idea that media coverage of terrorism encourages or benefits the perpetrators is fairly well entrenched in both government circles and the public consciousness.

Mass media, especially television, have come under fire for how they treat coverage of terrorist events. Generally, these criticisms center on how media "allow" themselves to be exploited by terrorists, how media "encourage" terrorism and the "effectiveness" of terrorist tactics publicized by media.

This paper will present a typology of terrorism which is grounded in how media differentially cover each type. The typology challenges some of the basic assumptions mentioned above and the conventional wisdom about the net effects of the media's portrayal of each type of terrorism. Essentially, the model presented here emphasizes the amount of coverage each form of terrorism receives, the flavor or tone of the coverage, and the political effects of such coverage in influencing public opinion and consciousness.

Grievance terror is identified as terror which challenges power. It usually involves a precipitating incident but is often drawn out

in a crisis atmosphere. On the other hand, institutional terror is terror which seeks to maintain the status quo and power.

While the two types of terror differ in the degree to which perpetrators desire media coverage (grievance- yes, institutional- no), it will be argued that the net effect of such coverage will generally reflect and favor the U.S. government perspective. In the case of grievance terror, it will be shown that government sources dominate the news and that the tone of news coverage is hostile to groups which challenge U.S. or "Western" interests. With respect to institutional terrorism, it is the lack of coverage (especially relative to the coverage of grievance terror) which conceals the degree of U.S. government complicity in this type of terror through support of repressive governments. Thus, the net effect of such coverage of both forms of terror is a public consciousness about terrorism which will by and large support the U.S. government's perspective and policies.

Before proceeding with a review of literature from which this typology is derived, it should be noted that the two key concepts of the typology have parallels and similarities to concepts used by others (See, for example, Schmid and de Graaf, 1982; Herman, 1982; Bonanate, 1979) to describe the differences between the two forms of terror. Thus, institutional terror includes state terror, terror "from above," and "wholesale" terror. Grievance terror includes "insurgent" terror, terror "from below" and "retail" terror. Grievance and institutional terror are used here to be more inclusive than some of the other concepts that have been employed. For example, the illegal drug industry in Colombia can be identified as a form of institutional terror because of its ability to operate an independent

police or paramilitary force to protect its interests whether those interests are threatened by government or individuals. Similarly, private security personnel (though sometimes in concert with police and military) working for large landowners in countries such as Brazil and the Philippines have been used to eliminate squatters, harass workers and thwart political organizing. (Amnesty International, 1988)

Grievance terror, though it may be organized, is a far less systematic and enduring form of terror which is not protecting interests but trying to promote a cause, achieve power or create generalized fear. The primary distinction between the two is the relation to power-- organizations which represent powerful interests seeking to maintain their power through the use of terror engage in institutional terror, organizations which seek power or to alter the power relationship through the use of terror engage in grievance terror. The media's role as a dominant institution in modern societies is necessarily linked to this power relationship, especially since the media are highly interdependent with the political and economic institutions (Bagdikian, 1988; Herman and Chomsky, 1988; DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach, 1982)

As will be shown below, this typology is derived from the existing literature on the relationship between mass media and terrorism. A guiding concern here is the role media plays as a major institution in society: its interdependent relationship to other major institutions (most notably political and economic) and thus its role in preserving the status quo. The media's predominant role in transmitting to the public a "version" of the world beyond everyday experiences is especially relevant with respect to its consequent effects on public consciousness about issues such as terrorism. Thus,

we will focus on four main areas in this review: the definition of what constitutes terrorism, the amount of media attention and coverage given to the different forms of terrorism, the sources used by news media to interpret terrorist activities and the perspective and emphases in the coverage.

Definitional issues: What actions constitute terrorism?

There are many different reasons why some individuals terrorize others. The primary concern here regards terror as a form of political communication often resorted to when other avenues of expression are "blocked" (Bonanate, 1979). Since political activities fundamentally address the goals of attaining, sharing or maintaining power, the direction and target of political terrorism is a primary concern when defining terror. The existing literature reveals a wide discrepancy in the kinds of acts which are defined as terrorist.

Most of the perspectives dealing with media coverage of terrorism distinguish between politically oriented terror versus more criminally based terror, drawing a distinction between "crusaders" and "crazies" (Dowling, 1986). However, there also has been a tendency not to acknowledge the possibility of state terror in the definition of terrorism, focusing instead on terrorism directed against the state or symbols of state (Sterling, 1980; Laqueur, 1977; Alexander, 1977). Martin (1985) notes the neglect of most definitions in this respect along with a tendency to see grievance terror as irrational. On the other hand, Stohl (1984) explicitly adds the idea of the "purposeful" nature of acts of political terrorism in his definition, including acts of terror by states. Schlesinger (1981) notes that even when state terror is addressed, it is still sometimes exclusionary-- the

dimension of state terror focuses on Soviet bloc countries but not western or U.S. allied states (See Sterling, 1980).

Official definitions of terror are also varied in the realm of what is included and excluded. Within the U.S. government, virtually every agency dealing with terrorism has produced its own definition (Erickson, 1987) yet there exists no "official" U.S. government definition. Two of the three government definitions delineated by Erickson are fairly inclusive in the sense that they allow for the fact that states can engage in terror acts. The Defense department definition seemingly excludes state terror in asserting terror has "the intention of coercing or intimidating governments or societies." (Erickson, 1987:11)

Stohl (1984) also makes a strong case for both superpowers having a greater capacity than smaller states to facilitate terrorism through supporting or condoning other states which use terror against their citizens. The espionage infrastructure of the superpowers enables them to create more havoc in the world which ultimately contributes more to the proliferation of terrorist events than smaller states or non-state terror groups.

While governments are sometimes contradictory on the issue of including state agents as perpetrators of terrorism, the media seem to be more uniformly exclusionary -- more likely referring to state terror as human rights abuses. Schmid and de Graaf (1982) conducted a 'nonscientific' survey of newspaper editors from around the world attending a conference and found that over 75% did not include violence perpetrated by states against their own citizens as terrorism. Further, almost all the definitions provided by these editors implicitly assume terrorism is directed at governments and is

usually equated with "left-wing extremism." It is important to note that most news organizations do have specific policies on the application of loaded terms like "terrorist" and "guerilla" (Schmid and de Graaf, 1982). The net effect of news organizations' conscious use of language in this manner makes it clear that casting terror as something outside the government will tend to produce a public consciousness which does not perceive the possibility of governments as terrorist in their treatment of citizens.

The recently released study of Nightline guests (Hoynes and Croteau, 1989) provides particular insight into the narrow conception of terrorism. Recall that Nightline is a show born of terrorism--originally called "America Held Hostage." Hoynes and Croteau demonstrate the legacy of the hostage crisis still influences the program's perspective on terror: terrorist acts are those which are committed against "Us" (U.S./Western interests). State terror, even under the gloss of "human rights abuses," receives little attention on Nightline, especially if the U.S. is a sponsor or supporter of a government engaging in state terror.

Stohl (1984, 1988) and Lopez (1984) are explicit in their definitions of what constitutes state terror. Lopez identifies four main components or tactics states can use to terrorize citizens:

Information control: surveillance, press censorship, "thought reform"
Law enforcement: expulsions, lack of protection from vigilante groups, direct and arbitrary arrest
Economic coercion: discrimination, bribery, repression of union and association activities
Life threatening: beatings, bombings, disappearances, torture, "confessions" under duress

Stohl (1984) extends this by adding that states can employ terror beyond their borders-- covert behaviors and use of surrogates

(another state or organization) to commit acts of terror internationally.

Thus, a definition of terror which appropriately entails the realities of the modern world must be inclusive enough to allow for states or other powerful entities to engage in terrorist acts. The definition below is sufficiently inclusive so that media reports of human rights abuses can be cast as examples of institutional terror:

> the purposeful act or threat of violence to create fear and/or compliant behavior in a victim and/or audience of the act or threat (Stohl, 1984:43).

Amount of Coverage

Since many terrorist acts are of an international nature, it should be no surprise the amount of coverage the different forms of terrorism receive is not that different from coverage of other international events and affairs.

Larson's (1982) study of the networks' international news coverage found two basic trends: a tendency to look at the Third World almost exclusively during times of crisis, upheaval and natural disasters and a continual emphasis on the roles or interests of the U.S. government. For example, in 61% of all international news stories studied, the U.S. was one of the countries specifically mentioned. Further, Western Europe was the most heavily covered region.

Another theme emerging from how the media cover the world is the amount of time given to bring historical and cultural context to an event. The lack of historical context in terror stories has been termed "blanked out history" (Wurth-Hough, 1983). Dahlgren (1982)

sees that as a result of the focus on the timely and dramatic--revolutions, coups, and earthquakes. Such a focus usually means less time in a story is given to the "why" of an event. Thus, the Third World is cast as "teeming" with violence but the violence is often the active subject in a sentence or story. This reification of violence as a natural part of the landscape decontextualizes the political and social factors which contribute to its initiation. Dahlgren says violence is usually defined in the news as something committed against the status quo and the U.S. or West in general are the ones who redeem the situation or contribute to its peaceful resolution.

Larson's (1986) study of the Iran hostage crisis also illustrates clearly what kinds of events trigger news media coverage and what kinds of priorities guide the coverage of those events. The dramatic, visual appeal in the initial days of the story certainly met the technological priorities of television. However, in looking at periods before, during and after the crisis, it is clear the news media gave spotty coverage of the social and historical realities leading to the overthrow of the Shah. A visit by the Shah to the U.S. and the demonstrations surrounding that visit drew the media's attention to the internal Iranian political situation. Even so, there was little coverage in the period between the Shah's ouster in February 1979 and the taking of the hostages in November 1979. Larson notes such spotty coverage contributes to the fragmented picture of the situation and the lack of historical and social context necessary to fully appreciate and interpret such events.

There also tends to be a wide discrepancy in the amount of time given to grievance and institutional terror. The role of the media in

covering state terror is where the whole issue of deemphasis has its real meaning because most assessments of the extent of terrorism find that numerically, state-sponsored terror is responsible for far more death and misery than grievance terror. Herman (1982), Herman and Chomsky (1988), and Chomsky (1986) term the differences between insurgent and state terror as "retail" versus "wholesale" terror.

Stohl (1984) identifies the origin of a great deal of the state terror in Latin America in the training of military and police in Latin America by U.S. government agencies. Death squads composed of "off duty" police and military forces are a fact of life in 10 Latin American countries which are allied with the U.S. Many thousands of such forces have received training at the International Police Academy in the U.S. As part of the training, some were shown a film "Battle of Algiers" which portrays a group of "off duty" policemen loyal to the French regrouping at night to seek vengeance against Algerian nationalists (Langguth, 1978). Those more sympathetic to U.S. foreign policy have said such counterinsurgency training has "unlooked for" results that lead to those skills being used "for a variety of bewildering ends." (Anderson, 1980: 275) Amnesty International (1988) reports that death squad activity in El Salvador emanates from two special army counterinsurgency units which have received counterinsurgency training in the U.S.

So, the amount of coverage given to both institutional and grievance terror is revealing in terms of what it says about the media's relationship to domestic governments. The emphasis on grievance terror to the exclusion of institutional terror is structured by many factors, but a primary factor is the type of sources used by the media in covering terrorism.

Sources

Some of those who see the media as aiding terrorists call for control of media coverage of terrorist incidents (Laqueur, 1977). Picard (1986) responds to such calls by asserting it is not publicity per se which may increase or reduce the incidence of terrorism, it is the way it is presented. When looking at the available research in this area, it becomes clear that the primary influence on media coverage outside the media's own role is the government-- media tend to "rally round" the position taken by the state.

As Schlesinger (1981) and Picard (1985) put it:

> ... it is advantageous for the state to set in train an information policy which integrates the media into a national-security design while, at the same time, preserving the necessary appearance of separation. (Schlesinger, 1981: 82)

> ... media are not likely to convey much information conflicting with the the views of the government in the nation in which they operate or that is likely to create a conflict between the media and the government. (Picard, 1985: 397)

Herman and Chomsky (1988) identify the filters of news which process and manage the conveying of information via mass media. It is regularly the case that coverage of international events begins in Washington (Larson, 1982). That is, it is usually an official source which draws the media's attention to the fact that something (usually hostile to U.S. interests) has happened. In general then, a choice by a media outlet to convey some international news is usually triggered by the U.S. being involved or an official pronouncement by the U.S. government regarding some international issue.

The effect of this is evident in Picard and Adams (1987) study of labels attached to terrorist groups and events. They found that

witness characterizations tended to be neutral in tone while government sources were far more evaluative in nature.

Hoynes and Croteau (1989) found that 48 of the 52 Nightline programs in their sample which dealt with terrorism focused on the Middle East. Forty-five percent of the guests were government officials and 91% of all guests represented elite opinions and perspectives. There was a notable exclusion of guests who are more critical of U.S. government terrorist policies. Hoynes and Croteau note that alternative views on terrorism are usually presented by foreign governments, most of them hostile to U.S. policies, rather than domestic critics. Of the nine guests who appeared more than three times on programs concerning terrorism, three were spokespeople for the Arab perspective and the other six were current or former U.S. government officials. This reinforces the "us as victims and them as terrorists" dichotomy present in coverage of terrorism.

The net effect of the media's reliance on government sources for what constitutes terrorism is two fold: the government as primary source means that media will give less attention to institutional terror which is in some way linked to U.S. government policies and practices. Second, when the media covers either form of terror, it is likely to receive a spin or slant which favors the U.S. government perspective. Even though grievance terrorists often seek to instill a generalized fear (and sometimes succeed), the government can appropriate that fear to enhance its image and role in combating terrorism or perhaps curtail civil liberties in the name of security.

Tone of Coverage

Another implicit assumption which pervades some of the literature on media and terrorism is that terrorists benefit from the way media cover terrorist incidents. This position maintains that, regardless of the tone (positive/negative) of media coverage, terrorists gain "status conferral" (Weimann, 1987b). Further, the goals of terrorist activities are often rhetorical in nature-- terrorist lack the power to "win" in a conventional sense, so getting headlines and creating fear is seen as a form of power (Dowling, 1986).

Cooper (1977) goes further by saying that the media's attraction to terror events means it inherently sides with such groups. The act of interviewing terrorists is a clear indication of media "sympathy." Martin (1985) says that while terrorists do get a great deal of publicity for their acts, the media tend to reduce those acts to mere crime or sabotage. Weimann (1987a) takes this one step further in asserting that the media soon shift the story's emphasis away from the terrorists and their motives to a more personal level-- for example, the effects of the incident on the victims or their families.

Schlesinger perhaps sums up the issue most succinctly:

> ...public recognition of a group's existence does not indicate that its goals are publicly favored. Nor, indeed, does recognition mean that the public necessarily understands the political aims of the group in question in terms that it itself would wish. (1981: 88)

Weimann (1985) found that media labeling of terrorist events depends on the ideological distance of the perpetrators of terrorism from the country in which the medium is located. That is, the more politically closer the perpetrators are, the more likely the media will label the act positively. From the other side, the more politically distant the target of terrorism is, the greater the chance

the media will label the act positively. When media do address the state terror of a government friendly to the U.S., both the U.S. government and the media are likely to portray the government terror as a response to left wing terror (Chomsky, 1988; Herman and Chomsky, 1988).

Paletz, Ayanian and Fozzard's (1982) data also refute the notion that any publicity is favorable to the terrorists. They found 69% of all stories included direct interviews, quotes or reports of the official side (government sources were found in 37% of all stories) while 21% of stories included some form of adversarial perspective. The kinds of issues covered flowed from this emphasis on official sources. They found the tactics (specific actions taken) and objectives (short term gains sought) of terrorism were most frequently discussed in news stories. On the other hand, the precipitating social conditions and the long range causes of terrorism were addressed in 16% of stories. A corresponding emphasis on the violence, the victims (and families of victims) of terrorist violence is found in numerous studies of news coverage (Paletz, Ayanian and Fozzard, 1986; Weimann, 1987a; Larson, 1986).

Thus, the tone of media coverage of terrorism can be identified with governmental policies and goals. The media's role in mobilizing public opinion on the Iranian hostage crisis (Larson, 1986) exemplifies its role as a catalyst in grooming public consciousness. The manner in which media frames these events means that the public is likely to continue to acquiesce to governmental policies, whether they are in support of institutional terror or in response to grievance terror directed at U.S./Western interests. The table which summarizes the typology and points made above is presented on page 14.

	TYPE OF TERRORISM	
Dimension	Institutional	Grievance
Goal/ Objective	Maintain power, status quo; eliminate dissident groups, intimidate others or all.	Challenge and/or attain power, redress grievance or expose cause, create fear.
Target	Individuals, political opposition leaders, dissident groups.	Governments, symbols of perceived or real power bases.
Tactics	Extrajudicial killings Kidnappings Disappearances Destruction of houses or community projects	Bombings Assassinations Hostage taking Hijacking
Media Coverage	Not desired-- key to effectiveness is to not attract attention to government's role	Desired-- one of main goals of action is to attract attention to cause
Media Appeal	Clandestine nature makes it difficult to cover; lack of singular dramatic event to trigger coverage.	Usually singular, dramatic public event but often protracted by "crisis" which extends media coverage.
Sources	Reliance on institutional authorities as sources means attention not given to terror related to these sources; Grass roots groups trying to draw attention to such terror are not as "credible" as state authorities.	Institutional sources set agenda for coverage cast perpetrators as evil and inhuman; though they are used as sources terrorists' image and cause receive negative coverage.
Flavor of Coverage	When covered, it's usually cast cast as native to a particular nation or as a legitimate response to a threat to the govt.; U.S. involvement rarely addressed.	Focus on victims or families, government "outrage" at incident, threat is often generalized to all Americans.
Political Implications of Media Coverage	Net effect is dissociation of U.S. govt. from terror or human rights abuses; reinforces idea that U.S. foreign policy aims are peaceful and democratic.	Creates fear among population about terrorism. Though terrorists create fear, government uses it to enhance "security" role, allows possibility people will sacrifice civil liberties for security from terror.

Discussion

In assessing the net effects of the way terrorism is covered, there are several dimensions: a de-emphasis and reframing of U.S./state sponsored terror, the portrayal of anti-U.S. grievance terror as irrational and without just cause, and a siege mentality among the larger population resulting from the way news skews the coverage toward grievance terror committed against U.S./Western interests and away from terror resulting from U.S. government policies.

The ability to construct and project certain realities in the news media is a powerful tool for gaining compliance in a nominally democratic system. According to Mumby and Spitzack (1983), news constructs metaphors which create particular understandings of the world. These metaphors are integral to the understanding that news consumers attain as a result of consuming the news. It stands to reason that certain metaphors in the news can keep people from focusing on other aspects and events in the news that are inconsistent with these dominant metaphors or themes.

At least three metaphors emerge from this review of media and terrorism: "us as victims/them as terrorists," the US strives to "do good" in the world, and terrorism is the product of irrational minds, not objective conditions. The structuring of consciousness that results from these themes can lead to what Mumby and Spitzack call metaphoric entrapment or "the way in which a concept is understood becomes so tied up with a particular metaphoric structure that alternative ways of viewing the concept are obscured or else appear to make less sense." (1983: 166)

Taking the three metaphors identified above, we can see that the net political effect of the way media cover terrorism is to reinforce the position and role of the U.S. government in the world and allow the U.S. government to operate in a business as usual fashion. Media do not encourage terrorism by grievance terrorists. Rather, the world view projected by media creates a greater tendency to rally round U.S. government policies and ultimately provide reassurance to citizens that the government has a "handle on the terrorist problem." (Paletz, Ayanian and Fozzard, 1982; Schmid and de Graaf, 1982; Schlesinger, 1981; Weimann, 1987; Bonanate, 1979) That is, though grievance terrorists may seek to instill fear as an end in itself, the U.S. government can appropriate that generalized fear among the population to extend its power both in foreign and domestic policies.

Government officials have begun to use these themes as a means of introducing the possibility of sacrificing personal freedom for security ("Terrorism here," 1989) The recent bombing of the van belonging to the captain involved in the shootdown of the Iranian airliner was portrayed by the media as bringing terror across our borders. Stories such as this and the 1981 Libyan hit squad scare have the potential for creating a willingness on the part of the public to acquiesce to government calls for the curtailment of civil liberties in favor of security against the "terrorist threat." In foreign policy matters, the public is more likely to support the government's role as a world policeman.

On the other side, the lack of coverage of U.S. sponsored terror creates a situation in which U.S. foreign policy aims remain unchecked. The lack of historical perspective given in the news when covering such countries and regions as Central America, The

Philippines, Israel, South Korea and others, allows the government to continue the illusion that U.S. foreign policy aims are geared toward justice and dignity for people.

The typology presented here is an attempt to consciously recognize and make problematic the way the world of terrorism is presented to the U.S. public. Becoming more self consciously aware is a first step in realizing how social processes influence thinking and perception. There are many arenas in which this awareness must be developed-- in empirical research on the way media covers terrorism and other world events, in the community of journalists which cover terror and in citizens groups which seek to create awareness of the role U.S. foreign policy plays in the world. Given the institutional links between mainstream media and the political world, it is clear that bringing more perspective and balance to the way media cover terror is not likely to be achieved from within. The challenge for media educators, researchers, critics and the public is to shift the debate on media coverage of terrorism as a first step in creating a more dynamic and critical public discussion of what to do about terrorism.

Data are currently being gathered to test the typology presented here through a content analysis of network news coverage of both forms of terror. A survey of network news consumers would be one way to uncover the net effects described here. As with much media research, such inputs and outcomes may not yield results that are as clean as the ideal types described here. However, it should be noted that the typology here may represent two ends of a pole with some gray areas within.

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